

Five days of soft rain interspersed with short downpours fell over the shortgrass country on the first week in July. Gentle wisps, in the main, soaked the pasture lands.

The new-age lament by old-age lamenters continued to stand: "We never have floods on the Fourth like we used to. Yet, the few of us old herders left draw such a small audience nowadays, we have to self-edit our material and deliver it to empty rooms."

Doctor's orders from the bovine tissue transplant limited my vantage to the front porch at Mertzon. The porch screens spotted with raindrops above the concrete floors cooled to 70 degrees and made a perfect place to look up from a book's page to watch dark gray clouds swirl in the Double Half Circle's direction.

Somehow on Independence Day, folks up the street shot firecrackers. The timing had to be right to fire between the thunder and lightning storms. Mighty explosives are sold outside the Angelo city limits, but those rockets and baby giants are rated to entertain in dry weather, not thunderstorms.

The Big Boss bought the fireworks on the Fourths after the tribe moved to Mertzon. You may remember the night the children's Shetland pony, Johnny, came inside the rock house to escape the blast echoing off the mortared stone.

What needs to be forgotten is how I rallied against fireworks as extravagant, wasteful, dangerous explosives, ready on the flick of a spark to blow off a child's hand or blind him for life. Sounds to be a reasonable doctrine until you examine this dedicated missionary who didn't worry about the boys riding idiotic horses for runaways down brushy draws in five and six-section pastures, or rounding up the ranch's sheep and cows in 105-degree temperatures for 12-hour spans on the threat of heat stroke.

No, Señor. He wanted his sons to be herders like all the Noelke family, and work in all kinds of weather. Proved to them that cowboys are waterproof — they don't need slickers or ponchos in rainstorms. Plus, the older boys taught the younger ones what they learned in camp over at the Goat Whiskers' fencing job, how to dig post holes and cut stays from cedar trees.

But he never thought a fireworks stand in the right location made more net profit than his ranch did most years. It never occurred to him that he only knew one girl

who lost an eye way back from shooting a firecracker. It never arose that he knew no one who lost so much as a little finger cuticle, much less a hand.

But out on the porch, rains muffling the bursts now and then, one of those "If you had it to do over" spells hit. Ones that come after doctors 40 years younger than you quote the mortality tables, as has been happening regularly after my heart transplant. Flashbacks, like "Why did you leave a promising career peddling burial insurance in Austin after college to go work for the family on a ranch?"

Smaller tidbits arose, like "Why did you go back that September night so long ago in college to a 16th Street poker game to double your winnings? Another: "What precipitated the contest between Pearl Brewery and yourself your sophomore year in college? Was it some insane idea that you could drink taps faster than a San Antonio brewer could fill a 16-gallon keg?"

More painful, "Why did you turn down Mother's offer (often repeated here), to buy the Gulf station right in the heart of downtown Mertzon after your first semester grade reports arrived? It was 1950, the eve of self-service gasoline pumps. Wouldn't have taken long to learn a swivel chair inside an air-conditioned office sits better than a straight-forked saddle does under a blistering sun."

On one rainy day, the youngest son, George, called to report rains in Austin from his law office. Indoors with a sprained ankle propped up, he reminisced about the time on the east side of the old ranch in high school when he unsaddled to go under his hair pad for protection.

Before he could file a grievance with the Labor Department, he had to be reminded he was drawing three dollars a day to hold a herd of ewes and lambs by the middle gate of the East Pasture, not three dollars a day to languish under a hair saddle pad in a little old three-inch rain. However, once they seek and find higher education, common sense wanes. A few hours of classroom signals you to start looking for another hand.

We are keeping all the heifer calves except the cuts. Better to stock up than make money or save the grass. So then next summer, the tune will be again, "Why didn't you sell those calves before the market broke and feed went up in price?" And the reply will be, "Ranching is a disease, not a business."